Ex-Condor through the Time Machine
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Ex-Condor through the Time Machine

by MeanScarletDeceiver

Summary

1964. BoCo's first day on Sodor. The not-very-happily-chosen representative of the mainland's most embarrassing diesel class is hoping to do his work and keep his head down and Not Talk. Nice low expectations, right?

Chapter 1: The Docks

Chapter Notes

> There's an *outline* now. So I feel confident enough to update with a new chapter!
>
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April 1964

From the locomotive's point of view, it was not a notably lively harbor. A ship's cargo was being unloaded briskly enough onto one of the docks, but the cranes were not living, and there were no engines at all—the morning's deliveries seemed to simply be piled into growing stacks on the quay. The trucks seemed mostly to be dozing, although there was a mild ripple of interest among them, as well as the men, who were on hand to see the diesel engine lifted down onto the tracks.

It took the crane operator several times to get it right. The locomotive set his face like flint. The process wasn't comfortable.

He was afforded the privacy that rolling stock generally are, which

meant that they talked about him, rather than to him, as they watched.

“Damn,” said a docker. There was respect in his tone. “He’s a monster.”

“Thought that thing was meant for our line?”

“Nah. There’s *no way*…”

“There is a way,” said another voice, this one crisp and interested. “He’ll run just fine on our tracks down here.”

“Since when are you an engine-man, Dex?”

“I was talking to Sid all about it.” Dex was gazing up at the locomotive in the air with real love. He wasn’t an engine-man and had no prospect of being one—but he was far from the only layperson on the island of Sodor to cherish such machines. “This beaut’s got five axles, you know, to divide all that weight. His class aren't hard on the rails at all.”

“Bit hard on the eyes, maybe.” To his credit, this commenter only mumbled his remark, but others elbowed him and called him a few names, for his rudeness.

There was some lazy, ironic applause, for the hapless crane-operator, when on the fifth attempt the diesel locomotive’s crew gave him the thumbs up, and D5702 was left on the tracks, next to the new refuelling equipment.

“All right, then,” hollered the foreman. “Get on with it!”

The workers dispersed, though Dex needed to be specially chivvied. He was very interested to see the locomotive crew’s doings. This was the first diesel to ever be seen at Brendam.

The preparations were quick and uninteresting. D5702 was fueled up —and felt much the better, for that, and for being on solid rails. It’s the rare engine who likes traveling by ship, and he wasn’t it. Then it was just little wiping, a little polish, a quick look and a single sign of the cross over the motor, and they got him started.

The drivers weren’t actually expecting the motor to turn over on the first try. They laughed a bit, at a loss, for they hadn’t yet found facilities, found the freight described in their orders, or even found their bearings. They’d reckoned they would have plenty of time, while cursing at their recalcitrant engine, to tag-team in and out and do so.

“Let’s get to it, though,” grunted the first driver. “Don’t know how long this will last, do we?”

“Foreman’s coming now,” said the second driver, looking over expectantly.

“Ace. Maybe he’ll point us in the direction of a guard.”

The foreman waved on his approach. “You lot are quick! You set to get moving already, old boy? Because if so, you’re my new best mate. I need some fresh trucks.”

D5702 froze, taken aback. He was used to requests or orders being addressed to his first driver, and was grateful when the latter stepped in. “Excuse me?” he said brusquely, coming to the right end of the cab.

It was an awkward little moment, that came full circle as the foreman blinked, then seemed to understand what was going on. “We could use him a tick before you’re off.”

The driver radiated skepticism and disapproval. It was so unsubtle that even his engine, who of course couldn’t see him, *felt* it.

5702 hesitated, but kept still quiet. On the one rail, he of course wanted to make a good impression.

On the other rail, he did not wish to be taken advantage of, either.

“You realize he’s not a shunter,” the driver called back, voice dry.

“Oh, he’s a big fellow, all right,” agreed the foreman, grinning at 5702 with appreciation. “But we’re in a bit of a bind here. Lend us a wheel for a turn or two, won’t you?”

“It’s ‘lend us a bogie,’” said another man, nudging him, “I think.”

5702 decided to speak up. He supposed the Sudrians might be making fun of the mainland men and their diesel novelty… but he did not suppose the situation would improve with more banter, and no action.

Besides, the steady thrum of his motor gave him a little heart. He had been so afraid that it might not turn over at all. “What can I do for you, foreman?”

“See that set of empties there? Bring ‘em over to dock one, please.”

5702 didn’t regret it, once he heard the frank relief in the foreman’s voice. This was no set-up, but a real job, fulfilling a real need.

His crew were inclined to grumble, within his cab, and as the second driver hopped out to spot them and to ensure they had clearance.

But Brendam Docks had been laid out quite ambitiously—perhaps too ambitiously, to 5702’s eye—but at least everything was laid out in nice long stretches, and it was not so very awkward to slink in and out of the sidings, after all.

Then, too, the dockers proved friendly, and buzzed indistinct appreciation for the new engine who had set straight to work after being put on the tracks.

“God knows I love our lads,” laughed a burly laborer, “but they’d still need another two hours to get checked and oiled and up to steam, and here’s our newcomer already making himself useful, minutes from the crane!”

“The future is diesel,” someone else joked.

“Knock it off!” Apparently seeing no humor in it, another docker elbowed one of the offenders roughly. “They’ll take away our steamies over any proper Sodor man's dead body!”

“Of course, Roddy,” someone else soothed. “But we do need some more locos, and no mistake.”

“‘Specially down our way!”

“Me, I vote we keep this one,” said another, giving 5702 a wave as he backed away.

“They haven’t seen him fail on the tracks yet,” first driver muttered to second. Of course, no one heard—except 5702.

Who might, otherwise, have started to feel a bit comfortable.

They drove 5702 away before any farewells, nor even further direction, could be given, peering out the cab on the lookout for their train. “That’s the one,” said second driver.

He hopped down to set the points, but the engine had his doubts.

“Are those ours?” 5702 asked his driver.

“We’re to take mixed freight, that’s the only mixed train prepared, it’s ours!” Driver spoke in mathematical tones. “Come on, Oh-Two, let’s not dawdle.”

“Yes, sir.” 5702 thought they had really better ask. But then, he had also never felt greater reluctance to risk annoying his drivers. He was

surprised they had agreed to transfer with him—they had never shown any partiality to him, nor to his class—but, for all he had never much cared for them, he was that morning almost painfully grateful for their presence. Otherwise he'd be quite alone among strangers.

Decent, friendly strangers, so far.

Of course, he expected worse, when he encountered another engine.

Chapter 2: The Branch Line

It was an unbraked train, and they needed to collect their guard as they signed out of the dockyard. 5702 had very little experience with such trains, and was cautious… uneasily aware that, if he went too slow, he would be laughed at, or written up about his time, or both.

But he understood just enough about unbraked trains to know that taking it too fast would *undoubtedly* be worse.

The engine's tractive power was impressive, but his brakes were too weak to altogether keep up with it.

For that matter, he had an endless litany of mechanical faults.

He was only five years old, and had not even spent all that time in full service. However, he and the rest of his Metrovick brothers had already learned the hard way, many times over, to mind their limits.

"Take it easy, Oh-Two," his second driver called, as they passed the up signal that allowed them onto the line.

5702 had never needed any advice less.

"Have a look at that semaphore signal! Reckon they run nothing but unfitted trains up here?" mused the first driver.

“Shouldn’t wonder, ‘specially for branch line freight. This place is a bit —quaint, you know?”

“Is ‘quaint’ another word for ‘stuck in the mid-‘30s’?”

“Something like that,” second driver chuckled. He was peering as often out the side of the cab as he was at the gauges and track. It was not altogether unpleasant, to feel such a sense that time had frozen before the horrors of war had ever reached their homeland—and it was a sense that drew a lot of people to visit the island of Sodor. “Thought it’d be more lively, anyhow. Maybe they don’t wake up proper till eight?”

“That would explain a thing or two.”

5702 had only just found his rhythm when they had to stop at a signalbox.

The signalman came out to meet them. A few words of greeting and introduction were exchanged, but the signalman had something on his mind. “Tell me you took the produce.”

They had not.

“Wasn’t on the train, was it?” challenged the first driver.

The signalman scowled at him, and threw up his hands when the guard came up. “How did you let them leave without the produce!”

The guard argued that he hadn't been in possession of any special orders, not being a harbormaster; the first driver sulked a bit about being expected to arrange their own trains; the signalman simply wouldn't let them pass without it.

No one noticed, when the diesel was run back to the docks to fetch the trucks with the perishables, that he was leaving spots of oil behind.

* * *

"We have the bloomin' produce," said first driver, having returned to the signalbox and re-ordered their train after an absolutely infuriating amount of track-switching. He had not certified for main line diesel-electrics in order to mess about with fetching stock. "Can we get through now?"

"Negative." (5702 had the impression that the signalman was enjoying the effect that his placid demeanor had on the driver's blood pressure.) "Line is tied up now with commuter trains. But they'll soon pass."

"Oh," said second driver. "Is that where everyone is?"

"Yeah. We don't have any engines to spare, during rush hour. Hoping your lad here can change that. Here, they left your orders with me. The first job is the most urgent. This lot must get to Wellsworth by ten after. Make sure the produce gets on the Bountiful. Engine number five. Trust me, you can't miss him. He won't wait on you, though, and if we miss him we'll have to send you with the perishables all the way to the main line terminus. Which no one wants to do. We can rely on you?"

The men peered over a piece of paper unfolded into eighths.

“Twenty-two mile line, you have here?”

“Right.”

“We’ll have at least an hour?”

“And a quarter.”

“Yeah, reckon we’ll manage.” First driver was drier than ever. “Are we likely to be held up, on the return?”

“No worries. Only one passenger service running, by that point.”

“Well, fine,” said first driver, “but we’ve already worked a shift-and-a-half to get this engine over here. We’re scheduled off-duty at one, so if we don’t finish all these jobs, we just don’t.”

“… Right.”

“We can leave our engine at the docks, yeah? And catch a train back to the main line?”

The signalman looked bemused. “Well, you could. ‘Course, you’ve got transport of your own, right here.”

“Not after one!” said first driver.

“Well, our Myron runs the line once an hour. So you’ll never be stranded. Your engine’s allocated to Wellsworth, though, and won’t get any servicing down here.”

“Oh, they spent a solid day fussing over him before they sent him off. He’ll keep a night.”

“If another crew can be found for the afternoon,” piped up 5702, “I’d be glad to keep going.”

The signalman’s expression had been peculiarly fixed as he spoke with the mainland drivers, but at this it relaxed into a warm smile.

“Sorry, lad, but we’ve no other crew qualified to take you out! Never you worry.” He gave 5702 a little nod. “You and your drivers find your wheels today, and then get a good long rest. We’ll put you to work properly tomorrow! *You’ll* see.”

5702 wasn’t exactly in need of a rest, having scarcely moved for a couple of days, until arriving at the docks. Being left the whole afternoon to watch everyone else at their jobs, no matter which end of the line he wound up on, sounded boring.

He could have stayed home to be bored, and been considerably less lonely, too.

—

However, there was no help for it. At least the section was soon

cleared, and the signalman passed them the token. 5702 slowly roared to life as he pulled the trucks up the line.

“A token system?” first driver demanded, to no one in particular. “A *token system?* Jesus… who’d’a thought? H.G. Wells, bloody patron saint of Brendam…”

5702 took no notice. He couldn’t have even if he’d wanted to, for the whirring hum that was the most wonderful part of his existence slowly but surely built up, reaching his every rivet.

The pace was slow almost to the point of frustration, the train was annoyingly light, and he was running solo instead of multiple unit, but all this could be borne easily so long as there was nothing but glorious clear track ahead—and all for him! They did not anticipate being stopped again until they reached their destination. There might only be twenty-two miles of this feeling, but he would take it.

Frankly, he'd never quite gotten enough of it to start being picky.

“Let’s get a move on, then,” complained the leading truck, as they whirred slowly up the line.

The trucks had been very quiet thus far. Most of them had never been pulled by a diesel—though this didn’t much overawe them. Sodor trucks had been trained to regard diesels as laughingstocks. But this one looked big and strong, and they had been hedging their bets.

Still, their game of follow-the-leader was irresistible, as always. One complaint proved merely the crack in a dam.

“Yeah!” shouted another. “Daylight’s wasting, slowpoke.”

“Some of us back here are carryin’ foodstuffs! It’ll go off, at this rate.”

“Phew! I smell it already!”

“I think it’s as fa-ast as he can go-o,” said another, singsong, and most of the train burst into sniggers.

Once it had died down, but before they could catch their next wind, 5702 growled a warning.

“Oh, my kind gets up a nice turn of speed,” he said, each word deliberate. “But I promise I won’t use it on you… ***if*** *you behave*.”

For a thundering, rolling moment—the precipice. Nothing but the slow and steady thrum of the train. Things could easily tip one way, or the other.

But trucks, while not noted for their intelligence, are very good at sizing up an engine. It’s half their business in life, to intuit the difference between one that is bluffing, and one that has roughed up some of their own before… and wouldn’t half mind a chance to do it again.

They kept their silence.

5702 gave a little growl of triumph, sounded his deep horn, and forged on.

It was a grey overcast morning. The rural line was not exactly eventful, but then 5702 didn't want any events just then. It was unfamiliar terrain, yet it could have been a dozen routes back in Cumbria, no more modern and no less. They passed a small city and a castle and endless, uninteresting fields. But what mattered to the engine most was the feeling of the rails, and they were firm and true.

"What's our time?" he asked his drivers, presently. It was during a moment when the perfect spell of the run had imperceptibly weakened, but he didn't take heed.

"Thirty-five minutes still," said first driver. "No worries. Steady on!"

They took a broad, sloping curve that should have presented no problems.

And yet 5702 was not fated to complete it. Not under his own power.

All at once, with a series of quick jolting hiccups, the engine lost all breath, all strength, nearly all consciousness.

"*Oh!*"

At the sudden slow-down, one truck after another rammed into his buffers, bursting into a cacophony of shrieks and outrage. No one paid them any mind. Their momentum pushed the engine through the curve, which, had it been any tighter, would have derailed the train.

First driver, a swear between his teeth, pumped the injector rapidly.

“C’mon—c’mon! Dammit, not *now!*”

5702’s world became groaning inertia, flashes of light, and an odd dull ache deep in his system, where neither he nor his crew could reach.

“Stop,” he grunted, though, as usual, never really sure whether or not he got out the plea, or whether it only reverberated somewhere in his mechanical soul. Sometimes his drivers responded; sometimes they didn’t.

But he knew from experience that, if his motor didn’t revive under the first forced re-start, repeated attempts brought nothing but pain for him, and frustration for everyone.

Absent any power, they screeched half a mile to a halt. All the driver’s frantic efforts had done nothing but flood the motor with fuel, and the engine disappeared into a mighty cloud of dark grey smoke.

Waving it from their stinging eyes and covering their mouth and nose with their elbows, the drivers stood by to ensure that the train had truly come to a stop. They applied and double-checked all brakes before gratefully bailing from the cab and into the open air up-line.

It took 5702 half a moment to come blearily to.

When he heard the trucks scolding and chattering, he reckoned he’d been better off unconscious. Driver only eyed him with weary resignation.

“Well, this may be a new record, mate. Even for your lot.”

Chapter 3: Myron

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

5702 only closed his eyes again, accepting the driver's sarcasm as his due... but not apologizing.

He would have been loath in any case to apologize for something that he knew he could not help. But then, too, he had learned that nothing he could say would make any difference.

So he didn’t. He withdrew into stillness and silence, and waited for the too-sharp absence of electricity to lose its sting.

They weren’t moving, of course.

There were lucky times, when a Metrovick Co-Bo's motor went off, but they could struggle on, though with a sickly noise and such fantastic and opaque billows of smoke that they were all inevitably mocked as indistinguishable from steam engines.

This was one of the unlucky times. When it died all at once, there was nothing to be done but to secure the tail of their train, and to send off the second driver to call for help. The driver retreated to the

brakevan, leaving 5702 alone with thoughts that he had tried again and again to drive clear from his mind.

It had been a little easier to do, once he had left Barrow, and specifically his brothers. *They* were all thinking it, and therefore it had been quite unavoidable for him.

They were, indeed, more individualized these days, than once they had been. Back in their bright and new days—when they had been in charge of their beloved Condor Express—the twenty members of his class, designed for multiple unit operation, had been interchangeable, not only mechanically but in nature. They themselves saw no distinctions among them and were collectively offended if anyone claimed to discern small differences in their demeanors or abilities.

That had changed. A lot had happened in those few short years—to the Metrovicks, and to the national railway as a whole. But the class was still extraordinarily close-knit, and 5702 had been able to cut himself off from the general cloud of worry and wondering only once he had been several miles out to sea.

Much though he felt shorn and driftless, there had been comfort in that, too—being at last able to secure his own thoughts, and to lock out the question… the question that had hung over them all, from the moment the orders for his transfer had been come in.

The new sights and sounds had helped, too, while finally getting to work had been the full cure.

But now.

Here he was. Alone with The Question.

Why the North Western region?

The Sudrian rail system was steam. Everyone knew that.

If London had gotten serious about modernizing this island, they wouldn't have sent in one unreliable diesel-electric. No, Sodor had requested the trial themselves.

5702 had been trying to keep the question out of his mind—there was no use in fretting or seething over it. But now that there was nothing at all to do but to try to ride out the dulling ache where his motor lay still, and the question loomed larger than ever.

Why had they asked him here, really?

There were literally thousands of useful steam engines recently or soon-to-be withdrawn—more steam engines than the cutters could handle. They could be bought cheaply, and God knew that 5702 would not have begrudged one of them his spot.

Instead, they had gone for a diesel with a service record that could most charitably be described as middling.

If they had wanted to invest in an impressive piece of modern technology, they must be very, very obtuse indeed, to imagine they had gotten it with a Metrovick Co-Bo.

5702 could only assume that he was there as a goat, to make the rather famous North Western steam engines look all the better.

Nothing else really made sense.

On the bright side, it would be the first time in his life that he had really succeeded in the role he was wanted for.

Some might have called such thinking paranoid. But if they had lived the five years that the Metrovicks had, they should not have been so quick to regard the idea as melodramatic. Yard politics on the mainland were fierce, dire, and subtle. 5702 saw no reason to expect better here, where he was bereft of any allies—even, it seemed, of any more than just the single crew.

Who were heading up to his front cab now. “Not our ride,” explained second driver, at the sound of a round-toned whistle. “He’s here to collect the produce.”

Coming towards them was a maroon-colored tank engine with gold accents, running light. Despite bearing letters indicating that it was North Western, 5702’s first impression was *Eastern region*: stocky build, round-topped firebox, three cylinders. He supposed that, like himself, Sodor imported all their engines from elsewhere.

It was certainly on the robust side for a tank engine, yet gave off the impression of being quite small and insubstantial indeed.

And that was even before it laid eyes on 5702.

With something that sounded, for a steam engine, *remarkably* like ‘bleep!’, the tank gave one strangled last little cough of smoke from its funnel, and then its fire appeared to all but die out.

5702 could have sworn he heard a curse within the other engine's cab, from which the driver leaned out at a jaunty and even alarming angle that almost defied gravity.

"Hullo," he called. "Excuse Myron, here. He's not much of a talker—and he's never seen a diesel before."

"I see," said 5702. Mildly. He would never dare cheek off a driver… tempted though he might have been.

"I imagine most of your lot here haven't?" his first driver called back, his irony far less veiled.

The driver, unseen by his engine, made a gesture indicating that before them was a rather *special* case, and that Myron's nervous nature was as atypical on the North Western as it would be on any railway. "Give us some credit. Sodor does have a junction with the mainland, you know! But we're strictly branch line, us and Myron. C'mon, lad!" he could be heard to say, even as he hauled himself back within the cab. "Look lively, now, or we'll be late for our train!"

With another few coughs, and visibly wobbly wheels, the tank engine managed to get moving. Finding a switch, engine and crew retrieved not only the perishables but a very respectable portion of 5702's whole train, shunted 5702 and the rest of the trucks to an emergency siding, and, after a tiresome number of track-switching maneuvers (it was a two-track line), were finally on their way, looking rather harried and anxious about their time.

"Sit tight!" advised the guard, giving them a wave in which the cheer might well have been sarcastic.

Sit tight they did.

They sat tight for *hours*.

The drivers grumbled indistinctly. Bored, not wishing to hear it, and tired after his sleepless night, 5702 wound up dozing. He thought it was only lightly, but without his motor idling he could sleep rather more deeply than usual, and at least one train rushed by and took him so by surprise that he didn't properly wake up until it was halfway passed. He was aware that silent Myron came by backwards with a rake of two coaches as well, whistling weakly, and still not daring to look at the great engine.

He was pretty sure that, after three or four hours of this, most of the commuters on the entire line had seen the failed new diesel.

Ah well. It wasn't like he was unused to embarrassment.

Besides, the one silver lining in this rather piston-wracking assignment was that he had been informed that he wanted here as a goods engine —so it didn't really matter much what the passengers thought of him. He didn't care for *them* at the best of times. When he and his brothers had been brand-new (not so very long ago) they had often heard unchecked complaints and criticisms at every platform about the awkward, unsightly new diesels.

That talk had died down a bit, since. But 5702 would have fully expected to hear it all over again, if subjected to passenger duties in this backwards region, where steam remained so loved.

Chapter End Notes

If I am 100% honest, my OC Myron—at least one more engine, preferably one who can take push-pull trains, just seemed to be *required* to run the Brendam line properly—is functioning in this fic as a bit of a foil to Bill and Ben (who are Sirs Not Appearing in This Fic, sorry. I'm going to throw a whole lot of crap at BoCo on his first day, but we'll spare him *that*).

Chapter 4: Edward

Finally, hours after they'd been left, they heard a bright, high whistle, and not from an engine that was pounding by. This one slowed to a halt behind 5702, shunting a fresh brakevan to the rear of the train.

“Hullo!” the unseen engine called. “You must be tired of waiting.”

5702 only sounded his horn in acknowledgment. Anything less would have been rudeness… though he was quite alert for the potential double meaning in his rescuer’s words.

“Oh, Myron took most of it,” the new guard said in satisfaction. “Good lad.”

“Yes indeed,” said another voice, presumably the steam engine’s driver. “Now we have *options*. C’mon, Stan, let’s hop on up and meet the new lot.”

Once the new arrival had pulled up level to 5702’s buffers, the crews exchanged greetings, while the engines eyed each other frankly. Neither had ever seen one quite like the other.

5702 was briefly astounded. He’d known, of course, that Sodor *was*

Steam, and he had known plenty of steam engines on the mainland—many more several years ago than now, for they were being withdrawn rapidly. But not even when he'd been new had he seen an engine like this on the rails—only in vintage posters. He looked to the diesel like no one quite so much as City of Truro. This small-boilered blue tender engine had some modifications, most notably his Eastern-style cab and his cleaner, less fussy lines, that made him look a bit less quaint, and a bit readier to work a modern railway.

But he still looked to 5702 like an engine that must be kept around strictly for holidays and excursions.

"Thank you for coming," the diesel muttered, briefly embarrassed. He had put in the long hours steadily fuming, hardening his heart against what seemed a deliberate slight. He still, in fact, supposed it to be so. Steam engines and steam men always considered it a fine joke when one of theirs had to help a revolutionary diesel. 5702 reckoned the joke got even better if the engine they dispatched was the oldest and weakest they had.

Still, he had as yet no evidence that the old engine had *asked* for the assignment, or was in on the joke. And if the delay had been that he needed to be steamed up from cold, on an ordinary sort of weekday, then 5702 supposed that it couldn't be helped.

"That's all right. We're thankful *you've* come, for we're rather short-wheeled 'round here, as you've seen."

5702 was spared having to answer, for his second driver spoke up, with livelier interest in his voice than his engine had ever heard before. 5702 couldn't help but be jealous, albeit the steam engine crew was also saying hullo to him. (Well, the driver was. The fireman whistled, then rather stared.) But 5702's own drivers were never so friendly as this. "You must be Edward!"

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m under orders from my kids to say hello. They love the books.”

“Oh, please tell them hello from me.” The engine from the books sounded quite used to this. “And that they must come themselves and visit us soon.”

The guard had a radio, with which he was checking in with Signal. “Right,” he said, covering it, as he conferred with the others. “Do we need to request help, then?”

“Have the perishables been sent off?”

“Yes, Myron was able to pass them to James in time.”

“Oh, then we’ve got this,” said Edward’s driver. “But hang on, Stan; let’s get the rest of our plan straight, before looping in Signal. Can S.C.C. spare us an engine today?”

“Yes, but only Bill.”

“Good,” laughed the fireman. “We don’t want both!”

“Well, that’s all right, then,” said the driver briskly. “We’ll get our new colleagues to the main line—you’ll have to wait a bit in the yard, I’m afraid; we have a banking job at twelve til, but after that we’ll take you the rest of the way, to the Works. Then”—turning back to his own crowd—“we’ll get on back to Wellsworth. If Bill brings the deliveries

up for us, then we can just run the goods main line, all the rest of the afternoon. Not too bad."

"What about Douglas and Gordon's trains?" asked Edward.

"I suppose we'll have to be back for the Nor'wester." The driver sounded resigned. "We should have time for one more delivery between that and our fast train. But Douglas will be our ask—otherwise we'll scarcely move a thing from that yard all day. Tell Signal to tell them they'll have to either find another banker, or break their lot in two."

"Phew." The fireman mopped his brow, a little over-theatrically. "You're sure, Charlie?"

"Sure am. I don't see them lining up to help us with our backlog!"

The fireman pulled a hang-dog expression. "I *meant* that you've just planned quite the busy day."

"Aren't they all, though," said Edward happily, while the driver gave an unapologetic shrug.

5702 was taken aback by all this, and he wasn't sure that this entire conversation wasn't an elaborate ploy to pull his own wheel. He certainly had some doubts as to whether the slight, ancient engine could even move him and his train.

"He isn't *really* main line certified?" he murmured to his driver, under the commotion of the other engine pulling ahead to the next switch.

Edward's slightly wicked whistle took him by surprise. "My hearing's fine, too!"

5702 scrunched his eyes shut. That was precisely the sort of clueless, fresh-from-the-factory slip-up that could easily stir up world war three, on the mainland rails.

Of course, *there* it was pretty safe, to disrespect a steam engine, who these days were even lower in the pecking order than the Metrovicks —though he still shouldn't have liked to do it.

But *here?*

5702 winced at his own idiocy.

The old engine did indeed strain for a bit at their start, but they were soon off. The first leg of their journey took mere minutes, after that. It seemed that 5702 had at least almost cleared the branch line. But that was such a low bar, for a locomotive who had been designed for stopless ten-hour runs, that there was not the slightest bit of comfort in this… except, perhaps, that his failure would have been witnessed firsthand by far more people and engines, had it occurred out on the main line.

Though then there might have been an engine available to fetch him sooner.

Might have been more interesting scenery to while away the time, too.

Chapter 5: Donald

Chapter Notes

I am generally opposed to 'spelling out accents' except with the very lightest hand, agreeing as I do with the not-even-especially-enlightened G.K. Chesterton, who even over a century ago was able to observe that it's classist af. (It's the Queen's English that ought to be written phonetically!)

Obviously, it's different if you *actually have* that accent, but I do not have Donald's and Douglas's. Don't even have a good ear for it. So, out of respect, I'm mostly leaving it be.

Given long-standing canonical tradition, you might sometimes see me bending my rules a *little*. But, for the most part, we all have "voices" in our heads for the characters, and I don't believe that me butchering the spelling of their every word is really enhancing my readers' experience.

5702 had cause to re-think a great deal of his conclusions so far, though, when they arrived at the junction. Like the harbor, this was a set-up on a much greater scale than the rural branch line that ran between them. Unlike the harbor, it was quite busy with people and engines, the latter exchanging whistles as they saw each other. A main line passenger train was pulling out just as they arrived, hauled by none other than a Black Five, who, for all its unusually bright green paintwork, nevertheless at once gave 5702 much more a sense of being in the right era. Black Fives were still common on the mainland, and indeed he and his brothers had been bailed out by that class of engine perhaps more often than any other. (And they had been bailed out by *many*.)

Of course, close-mouthed Myron was up here too, with a push-pull train, which the main line passengers were beginning to board. His side of the platform also led to a goods yard, though this one was much more cramped than the one at the docks. They wouldn't have much luck, if they wanted to put 5702 to shunting *there*. Some of the

sidings were no bigger than he was, and just then it was crowded and in some disorder. 5702, his own hearing more than acute, caught his rescuer hiss impatience as he pulled into it.

“Honestly, boy, you’ve left this place a right mess,” 5702 heard the fireman tease, after they came to a stop.

This made the engine hiss some more, and the driver laughed even as he reproved the fireman. “That’s enough out of you for one morning! Never mind, Edward. You'll have a chance to get it to your liking again sometime this decade, I’m sure.”

A deep-toned whistle demanded their attention. Now that the Black Five had left, another engine, with its lengthy train of coal trucks, was visible on the track beyond.

5702 stared at the angry-looking steam engine. He was blue and old as well. Of course, this was a six-coupled goods engine. Stronger and hardier than Edward’s speedy kind, there had still been more than a few on the mainland when the diesel had first been made. 5702 and his brothers had felt real respect for their sort, for—within certain weight limits, of course, and over shorter distances—they had proven, despite their age, capable of hard work even with rather little fuss taken over them (as compared to other steam engines!), and it had not altogether seemed fair to the Metrovicks that literally every single one they had once known had been scrapped in so brief a time. In fact, more than unfair, the sheer haste had been indecent, and not a little frightening.

Anyway, it seemed that the Black Five might be an exception, with the Victorian engine not actually so unusual, around here.

And 5702 might have been rather heartened to see one of the plain old six-coupled type still around and at work—if it hadn’t been

scowling deeply at them both.

“And where have ye been?” he demanded of Edward.

“We’re not yet due,” retorted Edward. “You’re early!”

“Aye, and double-quick it was I sorted this lot, to try and gain some time!” The deep-whistled engine was eying 5702 with great suspicion. More than suspicion: hatred. The diesel was familiar with that sort of reaction, although in his experience steam engines—while never the most tactful sort of vehicle—generally did not display quite such open animosity. (While still on-shift, at least. All bets were off, when left alone in the yards or sheds.) “And what might ye have there?”

“This is D5702. He’s come to help with goods on my line. And this is Donald.”

Donald looked as though he wanted to laugh, but was too bitter and furious to manage it. “Aye, looks as if he’s been a muckle lot of help so far! Failed already, have ye, square wheels?”

“Not that it’s any of your business,” said Edward coolly, “but he’s to be cleared at the Works before they’ll let him take trains.”

“Och aye.” Donald was still mocking. “And here was me, understanding yon diesels to need no such fash taken with them!”

“We’re all engines, Donald. None of us move on our own!”

Donald had been all along glaring at 5702, but only now insisted on speaking directly to him. “We’ll outlast ye yet, boxy. Ye’ll see.”

Edward hissed sharply. But 5702 responded with boredom. The truth was, Donald’s aggression was familiar. Tiresome, yet much to be preferred, really, to the pitiful tank engine who had cowered at the sight of him. “Reckon we will see.”

“That’s enough of *that*,” snapped Edward.

“I hope ye’re not speaking to *me*.”

“And *I*’d have hoped you could be more civil, to a guest—”

“A guest! A *guest*, says he. Aye, a sweet summer colt, it is... ”

5702 had to work hard to maintain his stoniness as he gazed at the bickering locomotives.

Uncoupled from 5702, Edward left to join the rear of Donald’s heavy train. Although both engines went about their business with cool competence, their whistles, when starting, made their mutual annoyance abundantly clear.

Steam engines aren’t able to keep much secret of their emotions. 5702 had always either pitied or looked down upon them for that. But somehow, already so immersed in their turf, he found himself a little wistful.

5702 and his kind had always understood steam engines, on the whole, to be rather crude and ill-behaved. They caused the workers and crews a great deal of trouble, and therefore could expect nothing better than to be replaced. Both scorning and fearing such a fate, the diesels prided themselves on their own self-control. But now, seeing them here quite free about their feelings, yet perfectly useful, and obviously in no danger of being disciplined or scrapped for a mere show of emotion, 5702 found his world quite backwards. Now it was he who felt deficient… and a little envious.

Even once the coal train had vanished from sight, a series of distant whistling could be heard. Such communication was needed during uncoupled banking operations, so that everyone knew when it was time to push, drift, or brake. The tones of both whistles grew less angry as the job went on, and, by the end, when Donald whistled thanks, and Edward whistled good-bye, it was clear that the engines had somehow wordlessly made up the quarrel.

5702 felt his first near-overpowering wave of homesickness. (It was not to be the last.) In that moment he wanted at least one of his own brothers, very much.

Chapter 6: Wellsworth

Chapter Notes

I spent a lot of time trying to cut out the "self-indulgent" parts of this chapter.

Then I said, to hell with it. And fully indulged myself.

Happy Friday, everyone. <3

When he backed into the yard, Edward was again coupled up to 5702 and the rest of the train, and wanted to set off at once—5702 got the impression that he had friends at the Works, among whom he was hoping to take his break. But he was tired and overheated, with the banking job the capstone to a busy morning's work, and his driver wouldn't allow it.

"You'll catch your breath here, first. I'll tell Signal that we can wait. We'll be badgering them all afternoon, and it won't hurt to gain a little goodwill now."

Edward's crew brought 5702's, to show them the stationhouse and the workers' mess.

The two engines were silent for a while. Edward had indeed been panting when he'd returned. And 5702, sticky and sore and mind even busier than usual, did not trust himself to speak.

A through passenger train at last broke the quiet.

“I’m sorry about Donald,” said Edward, after it had thundered by. “And sorrier still, to say that it probably won’t be the last cold welcome you get. We do tend to be suspicious of newcomers, and with you being a diesel it will probably be worse.”

5702 was beginning to think that it was more likely that Edward’s niceness was sincere than not.

He hadn’t trusted it in the least, before. Any engine with sense behaved well in front of the crews and workers.

To be sure, steam engines were generally rather deficient in sense. On the other rail *this* steam engine clearly knew a thing or two about survival. And a great many insults and threats could be made, even with an innocent smile and a willing manner.

But they were quite alone now. And Edward needn't have covered for 5702’s breakdown at all.

“You lied to him for me,” 5702 observed, voice flat and cold.

“Yes. It wasn’t any of his business.”

“I’ll probably fail again,” he said, brutally truthful, though it hurt. “My motor is faulty.”

“We’ve been told that.”

“Oh. Have you.”

“My crews and me. Just as a heads-up, that we should expect to be sent for you sometimes. I don’t plan to gossip about it.”

“Well, we can’t keep lying about it, either. It happens too often.”

“Good,” said Edward easily, “because I don’t want to. I’m a bit surprised at myself, actually. But it did seem too bad, for them to all have a go at you for failing on your very first day.”

“Your crew *hadn’t* expected that… had they?” 5702 was still bitterly brutal.

Edward, for his part, remained matter-of-fact. “No. That did rather catch us by surprise. Cheer up! The engineers at our Works were quite eager to meet you, anyway. They’re novices when it comes to diesels, of course, but I’m told they've been studying up. It’s possible that they’ve actually learned newer methods than are in use right now on the mainland, and will be a great help to you.”

5702 grew very silent, rather abashed… and not liking the feeling.

It wasn’t a *safe* feeling, in enemy territory.

And he concluded that it was best to try and discharge it. “I meant no offense, before,” he said, the words stiff. “And I… I regret my indiscretion.”

It was probably for the best that 5702 couldn't see Edward's face just then.

"I'll get over it," the latter assured him, gravely.

5702 felt suspicious—and much more comfortable. "You are mocking me. *Aren't* you?"

Edward laughed. "Maybe a little bit."

"Right, then."

"Is it?"

"Well," and 5702 found himself tempted to smile, "it's not as though I have a wheel to run on."

"Oh, your wheels at least seem to run just fine," Edward teased. "I thought it was your motor that could use a little work? As for your *indiscretion*, I'm not shocked to discover what I must look like, to a mainland diesel. Anyway, we're virtually all main line certified! There's quite a lot of work here, with rather few of us to handle it. So they make sure to ready each of us as much as possible for anything… just in case."

"Oh." 5702 found himself on rather more hopeful ground. "Might I be picking up some main line work, too? I mean," he added, at once embarrassed again, "you know. Once I'm doing rather better."

“It’s very likely. The main line engines mostly take our goods up line, towards the mainland. You’ll see a good deal of that route, when we go to the Works. But our branch is generally responsible for moving things to and from the western end.”

That made his immediate future a little brighter. 5702 knew it was a lot of gall, to immediately try to jump on such a chance, when he had broken down after an hour’s work. But there were plenty of times he *didn’t* break down, and the prospect of being confined to a single short branch had been rather claustrophobic for a locomotive who had once gloried in runs from London to Glasgow.

Yet, for this, and for all the reasons that he had rather dreaded this trial, he was still engine enough to want to give his hosts satisfaction. Better be stuck here forever, than to *fail*.

Looking for more silver linings in the assignment, he eyed the yard and station, which was all rather quiet just then, with no trains coming in, and but a few passing through. Midday tends to be the quietest hour of day even on more bustling junctions, and this one was still rather rural, albeit 5702 could see a good deal of town and roads beyond the station. Trucks four and five sidings thick obscured his view in most other directions, though after a while he discerned some sort of shed. Perhaps a rather small engine shed.

5702 was embarrassingly bad with his letters, but he could piece other things together.

“This is Wellsworth?”

“That’s right.”

“Good, then,” said 5702, politely showing more enthusiasm than he

yet felt. “I understand I’m stabled here.”

“Yes, indeed. You’ll find that it’s generally just the two of us here at night.”

“Oh, that makes sense. I think I can see the engine shed, then, behind those vans.”

“You can? How?—*Oh!* Can you see from both ends?”

“Not at the same time,” chuckled 5702. “And if we’re being driven we lose control of it, somehow, and can only look in the direction of the occupied cab. But right now, with my system down, I can look all around, just as I like.”

“That’s awfully handy!” Edward laughed in frank admiration.

“It’s not really so useful as you might think,” admitted 5702. “But it is nice, and we can't imagine how anyone lives without it. I mean my own class,” he clarified. He wondered if he sounded a bit dotty, saying ‘we’, when after all no one here would know about his family.

“It is a right pain, sometimes, being stuck looking in the wrong direction from whatever’s happening.”

“I reckon so. But not all diesels with two cabs are like us. Something about the motor arrangement. A few double-cabbed locos are actually two personalities, one at each end.”

“Oh, of course. Like the double Farlies.”

“That… that might have been before my time.”

Edward chuckled. “It was before my time, too, I think—at least, I never met any. But one of the old engines on this line had known quite a few. Sounded like the steam version of what you’re describing. What else can you see, then?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way. But mostly just trucks.”

“Ah. Right.”

Edward sighed resignation, and for a moment 5702 was inclined to offer some reassurance that he really would be *some* use to them with their backlog, once he was repaired.

But long habit made him stop before saying something that could be so misinterpreted.

After thinking it over, though, he reminded himself that this engine didn’t seem to be easily offended.

Though his voice was uncharacteristically timid when he asked: “Erm… Edward? Would you mind very much, if I asked, who they sent for me to—replace?” If you could find a safe way to hear the story, it was always better to know than to blunder about blindly, just guessing, and often saying all the wrong things to engines who were still grieving their own.

But then a wild thought struck him, as various hints and pieces fell into place. "... *If* I am?"

"Why, no one." Edward sounded surprised at first, but then he spoke warmly. "You needn't worry about that. There's been no one based here but me since the last war, except for other trial engines."

"Oh." It was 5702's turn to sigh, a bit dazed. It was such an abrupt load off his buffers. "I mean, that's good. I thought… especially when Donald…"

"You must understand, Donald hasn't been here so very long, himself. He lost a lot when his old region was dieselized. I'm sure a couple of the others will be nervous about you too, at first, but just you remember—you're not taking anyone's place. Our controller's bringing in more engines because we *need* more. We've never been busier 'round here, and there's plenty of work for us all."

5702 needed some time to process and savor the feeling. *Expanding*. 5702 had come to assume that expansion was simply a myth. He and his had only ever known rail traffic to be lost—never gained. The Midland region was littered with closed-down lines, and still their numbers just got worse and worse, year after year. Yet here, right over the strait, was this fairy-tale world where a transfer didn't mean someone else had been sent or was en route to the scrapyards.

Almost all he'd ever heard was that this very region was backwards, and even something of a loonybin. But, though he still wished another engine had been chosen to be sent instead, he was coming to find the prospect of his time here to be quite a bit more bearable than they had all assumed.

The Sudrians returned without the mainland crew.

“Don’t you worry, old Co-Bo,” said the fireman easily. “We’ll get you up to the Works safe and sound, and they’ll come to pick you up tomorrow.”

5702 supposed that one o’clock was approaching.

“Are we ready to go, then?” asked Edward, a bit pettishly. 5702 smiled to himself, hidden behind the billows that had grown thicker and thicker during their wait. However long ago his shedmate had been made, he sounded as impatient as any of his kind, when they were idle but in steam.

“We won’t have a path for at least twenty-five minutes, Signal says,” said the driver. (This stirred up another resigned cloud of steam.) “But that’s all to the good. Fireman says he and I have something to take care of.”

5702 was bemused when the fireman uncoupled him. “Nothing to worry about,” the man said. “Name’s Heaver, by the way. And this is Driver Sand.”

“You’re right, Sid,” said the driver, from 5702’s other side. “Wish you’d said something earlier. Hardly have time to deal with it properly, now.”

“Would it have killed you to leave off with just ‘you’re right, Sid’,” muttered the fireman, coming around to join the driver.

5702 felt his face freezing in embarrassment and annoyance as he realized what they were looking at. It was such a familiar sensation that he hadn’t even paid attention—but of course, to those who didn’t

know the Metrovicks, their tendency to leak water and oil from their side seams was all too conspicuous.

He'd been afforded a good wash-down the day before, in preparation for his departure… but whenever any of his motors failed the inevitable drip accelerated to a deluge. Much less when multiple failed. He had spent much of his long wait on the branch line siding gushing hopelessly and, although now he had lost most of the fluid from his system, the stains of course would remain.

No wonder the fireman had stared, before.

Briskly waving off 5702's muttered *there's no need*, the men formulated a plan. Twenty-five minutes wasn't much for such a job, but it was clear they intended to give it a go, and 5702 saw it would do no good to object further.

He himself was too used to going 'round in this state to care *very* much... but there was a small part of him that was something besides cross about all the fuss.

Besides, Donald hadn't seen the leak stains, but if they were indeed heading east then they were about to give anyone they passed or who passed them an eyeful. Problematic, given Edward's cover story that the new diesel was off for a mere routine inspection. Edward, once moved off their siding, clearly realized this too, wincing when he saw the giveaway stains for the first time.

So 5702 submitted to the blast of water, but the fuel and coolant had by now been given hours to dry, and water alone proved to do nothing fast.

"No good," Sand called over to Heaver, from where he was

supervising atop Edward's tender. "Needs decent cleaning solution, and even then some elbow grease and a good hour's work."

Heaver sighed. "Sorry," he said to 5702, with real regret, "but, truth is, we just haven't the t—"

"Maybe it's time to try the potion?" Edward suggested. He looked a little abashed, especially when Sand burst into laughter.

"Oh, that old yarn! Never mind, Sid. Long story."

"I've heard it!" objected Heaver. "Hell, I know where they keep the stuff."

He was off like a shot before the driver, or indeed 5702, could make any objection.

"Erm," said 5702. "What is a… potion?"

It transpired that *a* potion was a liquid concoction with magical properties, typically brewed by witches. As 5702 wrestled with the several new concepts embedded in this definition, he largely missed Sand's assurance that *this* potion was just an unmarked bottle of cleaner that had been sitting 'round in the sheds so long that the lads had spun fanciful tales, to explain its origin, and to justify why it was simply too good to be lightly used.

It seemed these tales involved an old underground currency based on divination stones, domestic strife in a former stationmaster's marriage, and a fatal curse leveled by a certain shadowy "witch of Wellsworth," indignant with how her product had been stored—

“But that part’s not true,” Edward interrupted, earnest.

His driver snorted. “*That* part?”

“The part about the curse, yes. That’s an unfortunate bit of slander. Mrs. Stationmaster died because of the Great ‘Flu. The timing was unlucky—but there’s no ’supposedly’ about where she got the bottle of potion. It was made by Miss Cats-Eye, all right.”

“You’re so sure, then,” scoffed the driver.

“And why not? I was *here!*”

The driver laughed. “Right. You *do* like to play that card. But there are no such things as witches, Metrovick, so you needn’t look like you’re trying to turn your own motor and bolt out of here.”

“Oh!” Edward clearly hadn’t realized that 5702 was getting more, rather than less, apprehensive as he listened, and as the fireman hurried back across the yard, hopping sleepers with impressive vigor and grace. “Well, there may be and there may not be. But even if she was, there’s no harm in this. Old Cats-Eye was awfully nice. Peculiar, but her potions never caused any harm. It’ll work just fine!”

“Oy,” said Heaver cheerfully, seeing 5702’s expression, “you two quite done making the diesel’s eyes bug out? Never you mind them, mate. Let’s give it a go.”

Using a cleaner’s pole, Heaver applied the solution and left it as the

driver ran Edward back to the train. For all his skepticism, the driver proved not above examining the pink remnants in the glass bottle. Meanwhile the fireman coupled the engines together again, and dutifully checked the rest of the train. Then he checked his watch. They intended to let the 'potion' sit for as long as possible before finishing the job and advancing to their signal.

5702 was just as pleased to watch the fireman's proceedings, and to tune out the spirited and extremely confusing debate, which Heaver himself had joined, as to the accuracies and inaccuracies of five decades' worth of local folklore.

So maybe all *this* was why they said Sodor was a loonybin.

But 5702 didn't contemplate this very long. His mind was on something more prosaic. Edward's earnest insistence on the virtue of Cats-Eye and the efficacy of the old bottle of cleaner, plus the evidence of how very long he'd served here, had given the diesel pause.

He couldn't deny the charm of his new colleague's optimism—but just now it had sparked a sudden, sinking suspicion, too.

In 5702's experience, those sudden yet sinking suspicions tended to come to pass with terrible regularity.

There's been no one based here but me since the last war. Such a fact could have a very different interpretation than the one Edward had so confidently put upon it. 5702 knew that all too well, and oughtn't have let himself forget…

"Sid, wait," hollered the driver, just as the fireman was about to hose off the solution.

“We have much time to wait, driver?”

“No. But didn’t you see there are instructions written on here?”

5702 raised his eyebrows. Edward gave a simmer of amusement.

“In *Sudric!”* Heaver sounded most defensive and aggrieved. “Besides, it was only a few words.”

“And you supposed they weren’t important?”

The fireman sighed, and pulled a face of apology at the bemused diesel.

“Right, then,” he said, all resignation. “What did I foul up this time.”

Chapter 7: The Main Line

Chapter Notes

> I managed to creatively bend my way around all my geography errors! The outline has been changed slightly to reflect this. (Toby will still appear, even though he's lost his chapter title lead billing.)
>
> Also, I wish I had already been referring to BoCo as "Oh-Two," which is what he is known as familiarly.
>
> But better late than never. We'll be starting… now.
>
> Please pretend that I have been doing that all along.
>
> Big thanks to CutCat for the beta read—the help with proofing—and their gracious absence of an "omg, weirdo, bugger off" when I showed up with a draft of 4000+ words. You are a godsend, and the best partner-in-crime—er, collaboration!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 7: The Main Line

Fireman Heaver *had* fouled something up. He had briefly splashed 5702 with the hose before the driver had interrupted him, and it turned out that the Sudric instructions were "Apply with force, then keep dry."

Of course, merely translating that much required a impromptu congregation of guard, gangers, shunter, and two porters on their lunch break, not to mention Edward, who was the one who recognized the final word. This was much to the amusement and chagrin of the men, who agreed that their grandparents would be disgusted at the halting show they were making of the mother tongue.

After several minutes it became obvious that something was indeed funny about the area that Heaver had sprinkled with the hose. The

wettened area, they said, was peculiarly white and shiny. When they tried to rub it off, it only became more so.

It didn't hurt, physically. But the mystery seemed to draw only more intense interest from his growing little crowd—and Oh-Two *did* dislike fuss. The best days of his life so far had always been ones where he'd been left pretty well alone, with his brothers and his work.

Right now, what he had was a growing crowd of railwaymen squinting and rubbing the immovable white stain on his side.

The groundskeeper thought the shape resembled the number 8.

A porter disagreed, saying it was a snake, eating its own tail.

Someone else opined it was the cycling lion of British Railways.

(From the sounds of it, crumpled brown papers from various lunches were tossed at the lattermost traitor.)

Overall, Oh-Two was very grateful when Edward, whose eyes had been fixed above, interrupted with a shout. "There's our signal!"

The diesel smiled as the crew resumed their posts, and the others backed off. He was pleased, too, when Mr Heaver waved on his way to Edward's cab. "Never mind. They can paint over it easily enough, at our Works!"

"Other side looks fine, anyway," agreed the driver, giving it a last

once-over. (The fireman pretended to clutch his heart in surprise at this rare word of approval.)

That was the side that would actually be visible to other engines, so 5702 was satisfied. It was good to be off. Edward had been steaming freely for some time, and started as soon as the guard whistled readiness and driver pulled the lever. He chuckled a bit, too, finding that he had braced for much more resistance than 5702 and the several trucks still behind him offered. Many a steam engine over the years had made this same discovery, as the big new diesels were in fact lighter than they looked.

“Now for the tour!” Edward whistled.

5702 had to laugh. “Lead the way.” He liked this steam engine, who had been as anxious as he to put an end to the workmen’s scrutiny, and who proved to be very gentle with his train. Of course, the unbraked trucks trailing him clattered into Oh-Two, making his already sore system ache dully, but there was no help for that. He’d had worse, and in worse company.

The tour did not feature much commentary, perhaps because upon departing they almost immediately encountered the hill. Edward proved as sure-footed as 5702 would have expected a banking engine to be (though he was a *strange* choice, for a banker—you couldn’t escape that!), but it was hard going, and he needed all his puff for the climb. Oh-Two, for his part, tried to ignore the discomfort of going upwards with no power. It wasn’t the first time he’d needed a ride, but being pulled up a gradient always made him feel sick and swoopy in the axles, and had perforce instilled in him with a deep if secret empathy with trucks.

Even amid his discomfort, he noted that, while the hill certainly *was* a hill, it also was not the sort of dramatic peak for which the mainland was now accustomed to use bankers. If they were using two engines to move slow freights over this stretch, then this region certainly *did*

need some help, whether from diesels or from larger, Standard steam engines. Even the much-ridiculed Metrovicks had passed harder climbing tests than this, from a standing start, and unassisted.

Though, going down, he was impressed by Edward's solid control of the train. He reflected ruefully that he himself would probably require a brake tender, should he take any unfitted loads this way.

Donald, he reckoned, would have a field day, when he saw that!

After the hill, they began to pass, and be passed, by other engines. Lots of them. And in an array of shapes and colors that made 5702 dizzy.

None of them were the same design. Oh-Two couldn't imagine how the single workshop that served Sodor could keep such a great variety of engines in good order.

Of course, some of the engines he saw, especially on sidings situated far from the main line, were likely under private ownership. But other engines going by with their trains were unmistakably North Western, with its distinctive red lining.

They simply came in a rainbow of colors.

5702 was familiar with a world in which diesels sported a variety of bright two-toned liveries and bold hazard stripes—but the ever-dwindling population of steam engines were in black or, perhaps, Brunswick green. Furthermore, the latter's appearances ranged from scruffy to truly dire. Hardly anyone took much fuss over them these days, and so to Oh-Two steam engines had always *looked* the part of some grubby piece of black-and-white history that had overstayed its welcome.

Sodor continued to be a revelation. More engines than not were in the region's standard blue, itself a very pretty color, but all the rest seemed to follow no rule besides the whims of their painters. In addition to umber, chocolate, Indian red, and, for some reason, *canary yellow*, Oh-Two was pretty sure he soon spotted every shade of green that humans had ever put upon an engine.

The only thing the steam engines here had in common was how well-kempt they were. Oh, not in the artificially spotless state of an engine before some grand tour or special—but they *were* cared-for, and obviously washed down as regularly as the coaches.

Of course, there was one other commonality.

On this busy but modest main line, *every* engine looked askance at Oh-Two as they passed.

But all in all things were going as well as could possibly be expected. The other engines simply exchanged whistles with Edward, frowned in puzzlement at the diesel, and rattled along. Nothing was said…

… until they met Gordon.

Oh-Two *knew* it was Gordon, the second he came into view. It couldn't have *been* anyone else.

Every engine on British Railways knew Thomas the Tank Engine and Gordon the Big Engine. You couldn't escape the knowledge... much less their posters.

This, of course, was the latter of the two steam mascots. A grand old Gresley engine, built in the days before there was any interest in a steamlined, much less a *light*, Pacific. Seeing it in person, the design struck Oh-Two as rather impractical—good grief, how could such an engine ever *cope* with the Peak Forest bank?—but it was still undeniably impressive, even more so in motion than in stills, with a flair and magnificence that Oh-Two knew very well none of his diesel-burning kind could yet boast.

Yet he bore an expression of shocked horror when he laid eyes on 5702. It was not really all that dissimilar from the terror that Oh-Two had last seen on mousy little Myron… but now, somehow, the expression was almost funny, plastered across such grandeur in almost cartoonish fashion.

"WHAT—is— ***THAT****?!*" roared the great engine, as he thundered and snorted by.

Diplomacy be damned. 5702 had to chortle a little to himself. The rattle of the two trains hid it perfectly… but he'd probably have been unable to help it, even without the cover.

He'd been the one replaced, as well as the one doing the replacing, so many times already in his short life. He knew the associated fears were a simply awful feeling, and he had never enjoyed being the one to inflict them. But somehow he didn't feel a bit guilty this time. It wasn't like he could ever compete, with *that!* And the Pacific would learn as much, soon enough.

In the meantime, Oh-Two was strangely grateful for Gordon's overreaction. For once an engine had managed to render this fraught, sticky situation… *ridiculous*.

The train chugged along, gaining speed. After the big Gresley's

buoying spot of horror, Oh-Two relaxed and enjoyed himself. Weather fair, tracks firm, and neither catcalls nor jeers—it really doesn't take much, to keep an engine happy. Edward occasionally called back the name of a village or other landmark, whether something natural like the Standing Stones or industrial sites like the milling operation off River Russagh, and seemed to understand that Oh-Two felt too poorly and unpowered to shout back. The few trucks at the tail of the train started to laugh and sing. They were fairly good-natured fellows, as trucks went, and everyone proceeded content for some while.

After passing a big station called Cronk, however, the path grew steadily more rural, and soon the Up line was reduced to one track. Eventually they were signaled to a siding to wait on a train behind them.

Nor did they wait long. It was a passenger service, racing itself from the middle station through the furthest stretch of countryside on the line.

"I say!" called the steam engine at the head of the train, even as he whooshed by. 5702 was nearly blinded by the dazzling brightness of the passerby's immaculate—and *extremely red*—paintwork. "Edward, what are you doing with that *disgusting* diesel?"

Edward blasted a scolding whistle, but it was no good.

"Phew! At least usually they're *clean!* "

He had gotten a much better chance to examine 5702 than the reverse, and Oh-Two knew at once that the red engine had, despite his rushing pace, noticed the faint outline of his leaked oil and coolant.

"Sorry, mate," the fireman called back, his human's voice tinny

compared to the rattling train. “S’pose I didn’t clear it up well enough.”

5702 tried to formulate the words to express that he was more than grateful that Mr Heaver had bothered to try at all. Before he’d figured it out, Edward let off steam.

“You did all you could, fireman. Ugh, but he *would* notice!”

“No escaping that one's eye,” agreed the driver, and threw back an explanation to their guest, sounding resigned and philosophical all at once. “Our number five, James. Was meant to be a fashion mogul, that one, but they got confused, and stuck the poor fellow with a smokebox and boiler instead!”

The red engine and his passenger train rocketed on down the line, and the tracks soon settled back to stillness and silence beneath their wheels.

The shunted locomotives were left at the signal, and both were profoundly quiet. There wasn’t much to say. Oh-Two knew that they *both* knew very well that Edward’s kind lie about why the new diesel was bound for the Works had just been hopelessly exposed.

At this point, Oh-Two could hardly find it in him to care.

Anyway, he rather thought that, if someone had subjected *him* to bearing such garish cherry-hued paintwork, he’d not be so free with his criticism about anyone else’s appearance.

“Oh, well,” Edward muttered to himself at last. “At least he can be

trusted to not run his mouth about it over the whole island…"

5702 caught the sarcasm. But he was still surprised when the fireman, who was up in the tender leveling out his supply of coal, snorted loudly.

Sensing the diesel trying to reckon out what he had missed, the fireman grinned and clambered to the edge, so that he could peer down at him. "You see, my dear Bo-Co, you're actually being—"

"Co-Bo," the driver put in.

"What?"

"He's a Co-Bo. Not a Bo-Co."

The fireman was comically slack and blank about it. "'S' the same thing, innit?"

"No," said the driver and the steam engine, as one.

"'Course it is. He's *double-ended*. Who cares which way you start counting the bogies?"

"Everyone," chorused Edward and Mr Sand—who were obviously much practiced in this sort of routine.

Mr Heaver stared some more, annoyed to be ganged up on. 5702 had

to smile a bit.

“Are they having me on?” the fireman demanded, turning back to him.

“No, sir. They’re right.”

“*Co* -Bo.”

“There, now you’ve done and got it!”

Edward’s encouragement was deliberately patronizing, and the fireman struck back at once.

“Ahem! *As I was saying*. You see, my dear diesel—”

The others sniggered quietly, but 5702 kept a straight face, and was rewarded with the energetic fireman leaning forward and patting him on the roof.

“—fact is, you’re already being pulled by *the* most gossipy hen on the whole North Western. Don’t let that innocent face of his fool you.”

“No,” said 5702 thoughtfully. “I can believe that.”

“I always heard your kind was pretty intelligent,” said Mr Heaver, all approval. “*Without*, it seems, having to be *know-it-alls* about it.”

Edward only whistled.

“Uh, fireman,” said Mr Sand. “We should be getting our signal any moment. And we’re not waiting on you.”

“Shouldn’t dream of it,” Heaver grumbled. He patted Oh-Two’s roof once more before traipsing back down onto the footplate, and, despite the most recent blows to his pride, Oh-Two found himself smiling fully.

He liked the feeling of being allies, even if he supposed it were all in jest.

They did get their signal, though the happy sense of being lost in the journey had dissipated, and indeed Edward had not yet gotten fully back up to speed before they were diverted yet again, at the very next station.

A large tender engine was at the platform with three coaches, yawning and idly hissing weak steam. His driver was fussing at him, but he may as well have been speaking to a nonliving machine, for all the notice his engine took.

That there was some bother about the bucolic little station was obvious. Railway staff seemed to be scrambling to entertain and pacify bored, wealthy tourists who were milling about, looking hungry, and starting to hopelessly wander from the platform for walks into the village.

“Edward, dear chap,” the engine murmured, hazily. He bore by far the most austere livery Oh-Two had seen all that day: black with white

lining, with silver accents centered heavily on his valve gear, side rods, and tyres. Altogether, the effect was to draw attention to his unusual 2-6-2 wheel arrangement. “Fancy seeing you down this way. Brilliant timing, you clever old thing. I’m just about out of puff.”

“I’m bound the *other direction*, Bartholomew.”

There was a warning in Edward’s voice. The engine called Bartholomew did not take the slightest notice.

“What’s the problem? You’ll be lucky if they do hand off my train to you. Pleasant job, this.” He yawned again. “If, I concede, a bit dull.”

“Plenty of work to be done, over my way.”

Bartholomew gave a weak, gentle snort. “If it’s work you’re looking for, there should be as much as you want of it here. Why go rushing about? Grow where you are planted, dear Edward… grow where you are planted.”

“Some of us are engines,” said Edward, with an excessive and sarcastic patience, “and not trees.”

“Why, so you are!” Bartholomew sighed, with a happy simmer, as his already uninterested steam died down further still. “But you run about too much, my friend. You’ll do yourself a mischief one of these days. A fine sight it would be, if you took it easy for a spell.”

“The rest of us would *all* take it a bit easier,” said Edward, warily eying the stationmaster and the crews, who were in deep and animated conference, “if we didn’t have to pick up the slack for you.”

Bartholomew gave a smile slightly less vague than his other efforts. “If it meant you took a nice afternoon nap for a change, I might even be induced to make a delivery or two.”

“Charmed. But I’m having a very nice little run right now, so be on your way and let us be.”

Bartholomew showed not the slightest curiosity about who “us” referred to.

Unfortunately, stationmaster seemed to have the same idea as Bartholomew. As the engines fell into an awkward silence (huffy on Edward’s part, and sublimely untroubled on Bartholomew’s), they could all overhear the debate being shouted across the tracks.

It seemed Bartholomew would need a long delay before they could raise his steam, and the stationmaster needed their one and only platform cleared out for the Local. Surely, it made perfect sense for Edward to turn ‘round and take the train, which was bound for Wellsworth anyway. And Control had already agreed.

Driver Sand, however, was none too resigned to his fate. “We have to get this diesel—”

“He’s a Co-Bo!” Heaver put in cheerfully. Then, “*Ow*.”

“—to Crovan’s Gate.”

“Is it urgent?”

“Is it *urgent?* His entire system’s down.”

The stationmaster gave 5702 the barest, briefest glance, then continued: “We can’t stick this lot on the Local—”

He had clearly determined that Oh-Two was irrelevant to the day’s work. And the worst part was, the diesel couldn’t disagree with him.

It wasn’t the first time he’d felt inconsequential to the bustle and busyness of the rails. But here, surrounded wholly by steam engines, it was perhaps the most acute such moment in his life.

“This is the special,” the stationmaster continued. “It must get priority.”

“*The* special?”

“Right! VIPs, all of them. It’s a charter. You know…” The stationmaster glanced all around before explaining, at a lower pitch: “*The Boxford party*.”

The driver groaned.

“We checked with Control!" the stationmaster went on. “You’re not timetabled until 7:05.”

“That hardly means we’re idle,” objected Sand. “Quite apart from this

rescue, we've got goods to sort—"

"You know very well that main line passengers are going to trump branch line goods, every time."

"—and we *are* assigned a train to bank at four—"

"Yeah. But you already pawned that job off for today, though, didn't you?"

The driver sighed. It was clear he was used to getting his own way. "Look, what if we just push behind long enough to stir Bartholomew's fire back to life?"

"If an engine is that determined to not go," muttered Edward darkly, "there won't be any making him. Trust me…"

Scowling, Sand gave up. They deposited 5702 and the tail of trucks onto a siding, where the diesel found himself parallel to the stranded steam engine, who was smiling vaguely, eyes heavily lidded.

"Well, well, well," he murmured, opening one eye to lazily survey the diesel. "*What* a sight!"

Then he closed the eye again, and went back to dozing.

Oh-Two normally didn't mind avoiding the pitfalls of conversation. But it occurred to him that Bartholomew was on his right-hand side. His eye might well have fallen Oh-Two's white mystery stain. The

diesel wouldn't have minded finding out what another engine thought it resembled. Sometimes humans could be so baffling. He was curious to know whether there had been cause for all that fuss.

The passengers were herded back to the platform and invited to board. After navigating more switches than any engine ever cares to, Edward took Bartholomew's place at the head of the train, and put on a brave face that lasted long enough to exchange words with anyone who approached him, gracious with greetings and complaints alike. But, as soon as the passengers had all queued to file back into the coaches, he frowned at the track ahead, hissing unhappily at the sight of the line opposite his original destination.

"Once they raise his pressure," said the stationmaster, conciliatory, "you want Bartholomew should finish your delivery?"

Edward eyed the other steam engine with blatant dismissal. "No, thank you, sir. I prefer it done properly."

"And a fine afternoon to you too, old chap," smiled Bartholomew. He still appeared to have his eyes closed, basking in the sun.

"We'll be back," Edward called over to Oh-Two. A promise.

"I shouldn't mind," yawned the black engine. "Made mostly of aluminum, these buzzboxes, aren't they? It's not a hard lift. There's no point in your rushing back here."

"It's not the engine—who has a *name*," began Edward, all severity. But the effect was rather lost when Bartholomew deigned to open one eye again, blearily focusing on the diesel's number.

“Please tell me that you aren’t referring to ‘D5702’.”

“That’s right.” Edward affected to sound mildly surprised that Bartholomew could read it.

But Bartholomew only scoffed, untroubled. “That’s not a name. That’s too many digits. You should get yourself something better,” he told Oh-Two. “Alison, perhaps, or Samantha. You are female, yes?”

Oh-Two glared. Although to humans there is no difference discernible to the eye, rolling stock can always invariably tell at a mere glance. They can’t explain how, but misgendering among their own kind is nonexistent. Well, except for trucks who might care to irritate an engine. “Are you blind?”

“Many have asked, my dear whatever—many have asked. Still, you look more’n a bit like that railcar over Elsbridge way.”

“Bartholomew, if you’re going to nap,” said Edward, who had to let off steam despite the passengers boarding his train, “then perhaps you’d better get on with it, so as to stop insulting our guest.”

“What insult? She’s the most beautiful creature ever placed upon bogies! Sight for sore eyes, that one. *He*’s a fine fellow, too. Despite that little hammer and sickle painted on his side.” He went on, ignoring Oh-Two’s splutter completely. “Sure and you don’t want me to take him to the Works, once I wake up? Save you a trip?”

“No,” said Edward shortly. “Nice change of pace though it is, to hear you volunteering for anything. Anyway, it’s the mineral wagons behind him that I expect would give you trouble.”

“Oh, dear me, no. I didn’t sign on for *them*. Owner doesn’t care for me to mess about with freight, you know.”

“We *do* know.” Edward sounded fatalistic. “I’ll see you in about two hours, 5702.”

“Marcus!” suggested Bartholomew, shouting over the sound of the guard’s whistle.

“*No*,” said the other two engines, together.

The Boxford party’s charter pulled away. As Edward and the coaches chuffed out of sight, Oh-Two found he had somehow forgotten that this was only his first day here.

Now, he remembered.

Broken down and useless in the middle of nowhere, alone save for the indifferent sleepy engine beside him, he realized his position all over again.

Chapter End Notes

I ought to clarify that I, personally, have no problem with James’s color.

But it was fun, to view the rainbow fleets of Sodor through decidedly 60s B.R. eyes! I supposed that taste to be a bit too refined for, you know… joy.

Speaking of fun, before I had to re-route the plot around my geographical idiocies, Bartholomew had a smaller role.

Only when I had to redo this part of the story did he interact with Edward.

me: oooh, look! new OC :) *holds him out to edward in cupped palms*

edward: *scrambling and hissing, with fur standing on end*

me: … new friend? :) :)

edward: *incoherent yowling*

me: i think he's quirky? :) :) :)

edward: i think he should DIE

So yeah. I guess I've given Edward a nemesis.

No regrets!

I won't get into Bartholomew's basis here (though you already have a big clue, if you do some Googling), as he will get into that himself, next chapter.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!